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Media Monitor

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Crisis in the Gulf

TV News Coverage of the Persian Gulf Crisis: Phase I

How have the networks covered the developing crisis in the Persian Gulf? We analyzed all 872 Gulf-related stories that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts during August 1990. This saturation coverage filled 25 hours 8 minutes of airtime in only 30 days following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2. That makes it the most intensive TV news coverage of any story in the past decade. Future *Media Monitors* will update TV's coverage of the Persian Gulf as the crisis unfolds.

Major findings:

- **Big News**- Five out of every six TV news stories in August were about the Persian Gulf crisis. *Page 2*

- **Seeing Saddam**- Saddam Hussein was quoted in 59 stories, nearly half as often as George Bush. *Page 2*

- **Zapping Saddam**- More than 100 sources criticized Saddam; 13 called him evil or criminal. *Page 3*

- **Rally Around What Flag?**- Nearly three out of five sources criticized U.S. handling of the crisis. *Page 3*

- **Looking for J.R.**- Three out of four sources condemned oil price hikes; 90% criticized business, including the oil industry. *Page 4*

- **Memories** - America's involvement in the Vietnam War was mentioned nearly once per day. *Page 2*

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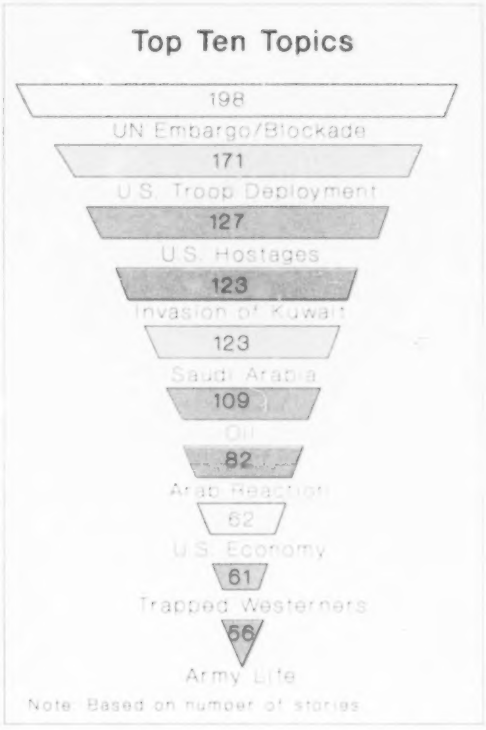
The crisis in the Persian Gulf generated 872 stories on the network evening newscasts in August, representing 25 hours 8 minutes of coverage, or 84 percent of the entire newshole. CBS devoted the most airtime to the Gulf story - 8 hours 55 minutes, compared to 8 hours 23 minutes on ABC, and 7 hours 50 minutes on NBC.



Crisis Coverage

Topping the news were two initiatives designed to thwart Iraq--the UN economic blockade and the deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia. Nearly one out of every four Gulf stories (198) discussed the blockade, while another 171 were focused on the U.S. deployment. The American hostages were also big news, with 127 stories devoted to their plight.

The plight of Kuwait ranked only fourth among the topics covered, tying with Saudi Arabia as the focus of 123 stories each. Oil, seen by some as a prime motivator of the crisis, was featured in 109 stories, while other aspects of the U.S. economy were discussed in 62 stories.

The specter of past U.S. military conflicts was rarely raised. There were five references to the U.S. intervention in Grenada and six to its more recent invasion of Panama. Both incidents were cited by Iraqi officials in efforts to justify their actions in Kuwait. But America's last major war, Vietnam, was mentioned 25 times in August, nearly once per day.

The View from Over Here

Despite the international cast, two out of every three sources cited (1701 out of 2483) were identified as Americans. One out of every five sources were U.S. government officials, led by President Bush (124 citations) and Defense Secretary Cheney (31). The U.S. military also had a high profile, accounting for one in seven (14%) source citations. Congress, which was in recess for much of August, accounted for only 3% of all sources.

Iraqi nationals, usually officials of the Iraqi government, were quoted 298 times. Saddam Hussein was quoted 59 times, nearly half as often as George Bush. Arabs (including Iraqis) accounted for one out of every four sources quoted on the evening news.

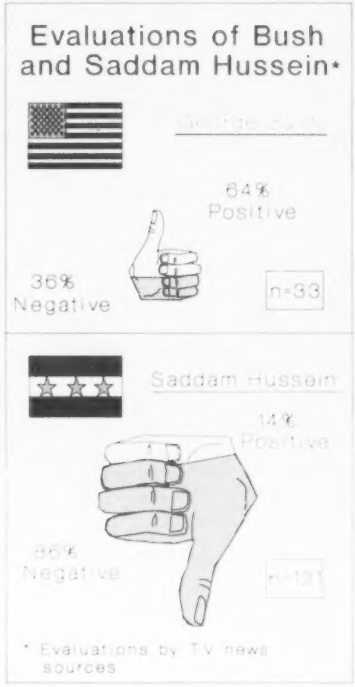
With reporters barred from Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia during the early phases of the crisis, interviews with Middle East and military experts became a vital part of news gathering. There were 132 experts quoted on the nightly news, an average of more than four per night. The most visible experts were often paid consultants to the network on which they appeared. Retired General George Crist led the pack, appearing on CBS 10 times over the course of the month. Other regulars were: former Ambassador Richard Murphey, seen 6 times on NBC; Judith Kipper and Anthony Cordesman, 5 times each on ABC; and retired Admiral William J. Crowe, who was in 4 stories.

Spotlight on Saddam

In many ways, the crisis has been presented as a personal struggle between Saddam Hussein and George Bush. By dominating the Gulf story, both became targets for extensive praise and criticism. Bush received 33 clearly positive or negative evaluations. But debate over his role was dwarfed by the focus on Iraq's leader. Saddam Hussein was the target of 121 evaluations, almost four times as many as the American president.

Bush proved relatively popular, receiving about two positive evaluations for each negative assessment (64% positive). By contrast, six out of seven judgments on Saddam (86%) were negative. That left the Iraqi ruler on the receiving end of more than 100 negative assessments. Moreover, one in eight criticisms (13 in all) went beyond the bounds of normal political discourse to portray Saddam as criminal or evil. These condemnations came from both U.S. officials and ordinary people. Thus, NBC quoted Defense Secretary Cheney, "I think he's an evil man." (NBC 8/12). On CBS, an Arab refugee en route to Jordan sounded even more alarmed: "He is not human being! He is killer, he is killer!" (CBS 8/25)

Although a handful of Iraqi and Jordanian sources praised Saddam for standing up to the West, Arab sources as a group gave him negative evaluations 68% of the time. Even network reporters got into the act, providing only one positive assessment of Saddam, compared to 18 negative evaluations. NBC's Tom Brokaw, for example, called Saddam a "ruthless and calculating ruler." (NBC 8/6) Such stark judgments by reporters, while relatively infrequent, further tilted the tone of the coverage against the Iraqi leader.



This is becoming a television negotiation: brinksmanship by television.

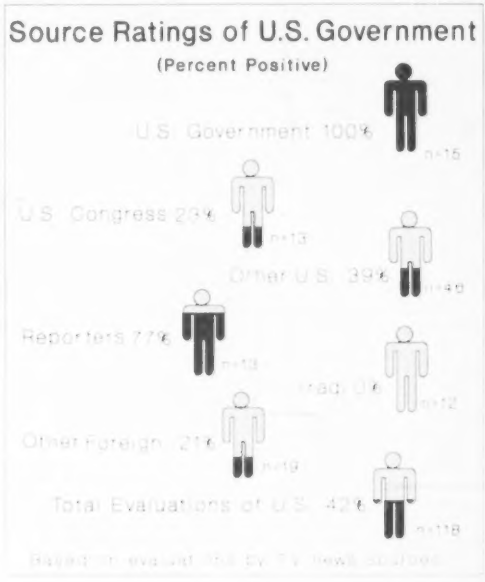
-Dan Rather
CBS, 8/28/90

Rating the Players

Despite the largely favorable commentary President Bush received, nearly three out of five (58%) evaluations of how the U.S. handled the crisis were negative. The key policy areas for the U.S.--the troop deployment, the blockade, and the hostages--saw approximately equal numbers supporting and criticizing U.S. policies. The main sticking point for the Administration were sources who criticized its handling of overall U.S.-Iraqi relations, especially past support for the Baghdad regime.

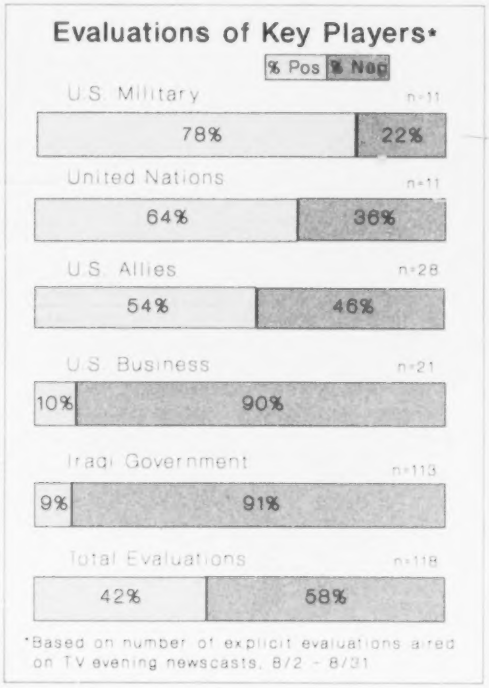
Even among domestic sources, only a slight majority (53%) supported U.S. handling of the crisis. Among foreign sources, praise was far more rare; 87% criticized various aspects of U.S. policy. Not surprisingly, Iraqi government sources were the most frequent source of criticism. When the U.S. government expelled most Iraqi diplomats, for example, the Iraqi ambassador called the move "uncalled for, unfair, and unjust. We feel we have been victimized once more." (CBS 8/27) But only one out of five non-Iraqi foreign sources supported U.S. policy.

By contrast, both the U.S. military and the United Nations received mostly favorable press during the crisis. The government of Iraq, however, fared even worse than its leader. Only 9% of the 113 evaluations of the Iraqi government were positive. Many of these criticisms centered on the invasion of Kuwait and the seizure of Western hostages. For example, when Iraq released videotapes of the hostages, White House spokesman Marlin



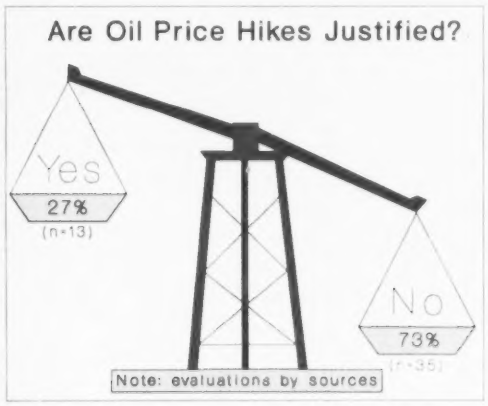
Fitzwater declared that "to hold men, women, and children as targets for viewing is sick beyond expression." (CBS 8/24)

As the Gulf crisis seemed to portend an economic downturn in the United States, some of the criticism turned against U.S. business, especially the major oil companies. Although discussed less often, criticism of business was proportionally as negative as coverage of the Iraqis. Nineteen of 21 sources (90%) provided negative evaluations of business during the crisis.



Raising the Price

Criticism of the oil companies focused intensively on rising oil prices. Nearly three out of four sources (73%) argued that price hikes were not justified by events in the Persian Gulf. Virtually all those who defended higher prices came from the oil industry. Among sources not connected to the oil industry, 90% said that the hikes were unjustified. On one CBS broadcast, Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) charged, "there is no doubt that in the last week American consumers were ripped off on a massive scale"; and consumer activist Mark Green was even more direct: "Big Oil is using Saddam Hussein to pick consumers' pockets." (CBS 8/7)



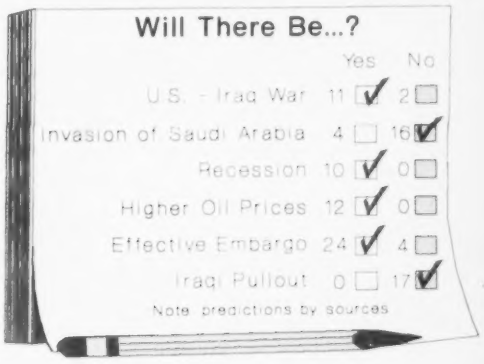
Television seems to be not just covering the crisis, but mediating it.

-Tom Shales
Washington Post,
8/29/90

Future Shocks

Once the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait was accomplished, much of the coverage became speculative. We coded 522 statements which raised a variety of future possibilities. The most frequent object of speculation was a war between the U.S. and Iraq, a possibility that was raised 125 times. An Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia was mentioned 69 times, and the possibility that Iraq might use chemical weapons was raised 30 times. Nearly two-thirds of all speculative statements revolved around highly negative outcomes such as war, other violence, or economic chaos.

Most of these statements simply raised various possibilities without predicting their outcome. When experts and others did venture guesses about the outcome of the crisis, most were pessimistic. Eleven out of 13 sources (84%) predicted an eventual war between the U.S. and Iraq. Moreover, all 22 sources who were quoted on economic scenarios foresaw bad times ahead. Twelve predicted higher oil prices, and another 10 forecast an economic recession in the U.S. When the possibility was raised that Iraq might retreat from Kuwait on its own accord, all 17 sources rejected the notion. Tempering the general air of pessimism, three out of four sources felt that an invasion of Saudi Arabia would be unlikely, and six out of seven argued that the UN economic sanctions against Iraq would be effective.



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Media Monitor

Volume IV Number 10 December 1990

Free Speech vs. Obscenity

The Debate Over Government Standards for Speech and Art

How have the media covered the ongoing public debate over controversial speech and art? To find out, we analyzed media coverage of issues ranging from the obscenity prosecution of the rap music group "2 Live Crew" to the Congressional debate on government funding of art with sexual or political content. We examined 234 news and opinion pieces that appeared in the *New York Times, Washington Post*, and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts from January through September 1990.

Major findings:

- **Censuring Censors** - Most sources favored government support for art and rejected restrictions on NEA grants. *Page 2*

- **Who Says?** - Opinion was split on government deciding what's obscene. Government standards were usually upheld in the *Washington Post* and TV news, but opposed in the *New York Times.* *Page 2*

- **Bad Boys** - 2 Live Crew's songs were usually described as obscene. Robert Mapplethorpe's pictures were not. *Page 2*

- **Pornographers vs. Puritans** - Highly negative language was used to describe the pro-restriction side over twice as often as the pro-expression side. *Page 3*

- **X Rated Actors** - Anti-pornography groups were the most heavily criticized for the role they played, but all parties fared badly. *Page 4*

Blue News

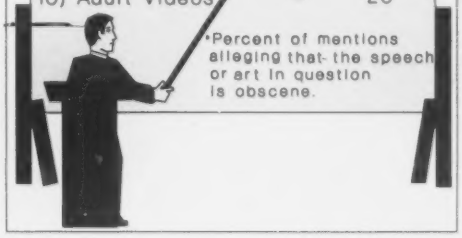
For the period January through September 1990, we analyzed media coverage of forms of expression that were charged with being indecent, obscene, or pornographic. This included the debate over government subsidy of controversial art, as well as efforts to prohibit speech and art that allegedly offended public standards of decency. We examined 234 news items, including 28 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news, 98 articles in the *New York Times*, and 108 articles in the *Washington Post*. This included not only hard news, but also editorials, signed columns, and art and music reviews. Much of the media debate took place in the opinion-oriented sections of the newspapers. Moreover, the balance of views expressed was usually similar in news and opinion pieces. We note below the only major instance in which differences appeared.

The most frequently reported controversy (87 items) concerned the ongoing Congressional battle over government funding for controversial art by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Close behind (74 items) was judicial news, mainly involving local prosecutions of the rap group 2 Live Crew and Cincinnati museum director Dennis Barrie. The third most frequent topic concerned homosexuality (37 items), in connection with homoerotic artistic imagery. Nearly as frequent (36 items), were discussions of children's access to provocative or obscene material.

Subjects of Controversy

	Mentions	Percent Obscene*
1) 2 Live Crew	103	83
2) R. Mapplethorpe	97	33
3) K. Finley	21	19
4) D. Barrie	13	38
4) A.D. Clay	13	8
4) A. Serrano	13	46
7) H. Hughes	9	0
7) D. Wojnarowicz	9	44
7) Adult Cable TV	9	89
10) Adult Videos	5	20

*Percent of mentions alleging that the speech or art in question is obscene.



Fit to Print?

The most newsworthy controversies involved the rap group 2 Live Crew (103 mentions) and the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (97). A debate over misogyny, racism, and antisemitism in rap music came to a head in the Florida obscenity trial and eventual acquittal of 2 Live Crew. Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs were featured in a show that was partly funded by an NEA grant. This became the lightning rod for an extended struggle in Congress over NEA appropriations and the propriety of government funding for such material. Other artists who figured in newsworthy obscenity/free expression controversies included Karen Finley, Andres Serrano, Holly Hughes, and David Wojnarowicz, whose work variously involved erotic imagery and strong political and social commentary. Cincinnati museum director Dennis Barrie was in the news during his trial and acquittal on obscenity charges for showing a Mapplethorpe exhibition there. Comedian Andrew Dice Clay made news for his ethnic and misogynic jokes.

Although all these individuals were controversial, only 2 Live Crew was regularly charged with obscenity in news accounts. Five out of every six mentions of the rap group were accompanied by such charges. By contrast, Mapplethorpe's work was described as obscene in only one out of every three accounts. No other individual's work was called obscene in a majority of news items.

"The most hysterical reaction to popular music is underway since...the Pope declared tango dancing a mortal sin."

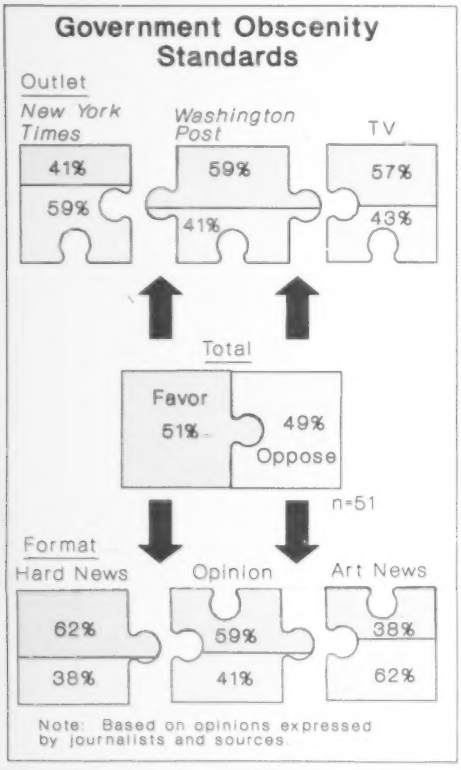
-Jon Pareles
New York Times, 4/1

Liberty or License?

Much of the issue debate revolved around questions of government funding for art. Most statements by journalists and sources favored government support and rejected restrictions on NEA funding. This held true in both news and opinion articles. The principle of government support for the arts was favored by 62% of journalists and sources. For example, Garrison Keillor called the creation of the NEA "one of the wisest and happiest pieces of legislation ever to come through Congress." (*New York Times* 6/20) In addition, 60% of all viewpoints rejected proposed content restrictions on NEA grants. Thus, Rep. Fred Grandy (R-IA) declared, "you cannot have art without risk." (*New York Times* 6/20) Among those favoring restrictions, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) argued, "It is an issue of soaking the taxpayer to

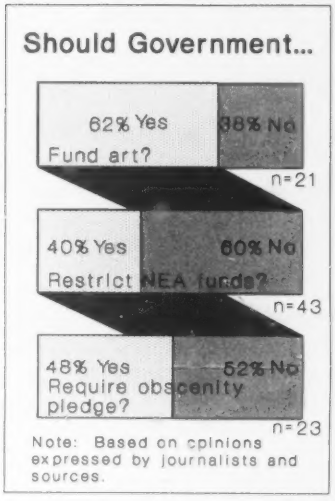
fund...homosexual pornography..." *(New York Times* 4/20) On the specific proposal that the NEA should require a "no obscenity" pledge from grantees, the coverage was more balanced -- 48% of viewpoints in agreement and 52% opposed.

The most frequently debated question (51 viewpoints) was whether government should set standards regarding obscenity or pornography. This debate included the NEA controversy, as well as FCC regulations on obscenity in broadcasting, warning labels on recordings, etc. Opinions were about evenly divided, with 51% in favor and 49% opposed to government standards of obscenity. However, there were significant differences in the balance of opinion across



media outlets and news formats. A majority of viewpoints from TV news (57%) and the *Washington Post* (59%) favored government standards. A majority of those in the *New York Times* (59%) opposed such standards.

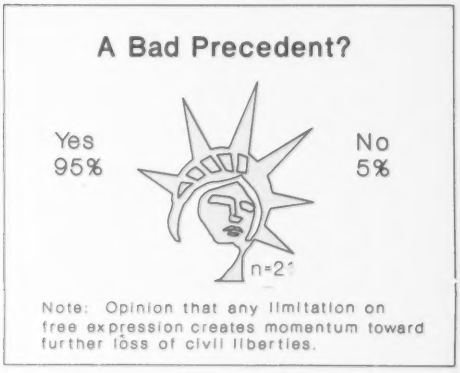
By the same token, more than three out of five viewpoints in hard news stories (62%) and nearly that proportion in opinion columns (59%) favored government standards. For example, the *Times* (6/30) quoted representative Dana Rohrabacher, "It shouldn't have been that difficult to reject sacrilegious and pornographic art. It is time we set some standards." Yet art section news and reviews produced the opposite result, with 62% of opinions opposed to government rules or guidelines. Thus, a White House source was quoted in the *Times*' "Arts" section (6/13), "we don't think that art should be censored by statute."



"The First Amendment says, 'Congress shall make no law...' It does not say, 'Congress shall subsidize.'"

-Charles Krauthammer
***Washington Post*, 8/27**

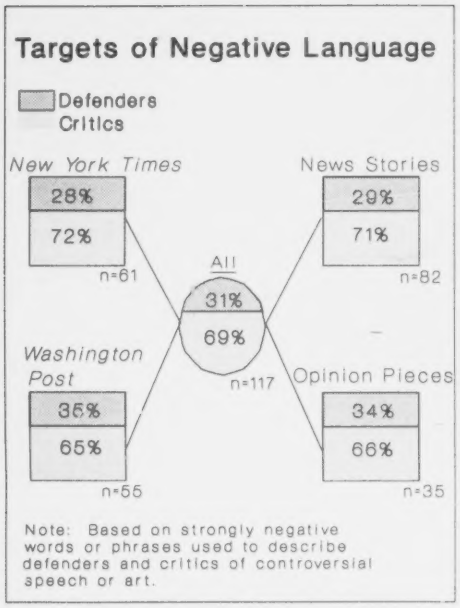
Although opinions were balanced as to whether the government should set standards for obscenity, censorship in general got a bad press. One of the most frequently voiced arguments was that any censorship establishes a dangerous precedent that will lead to more serious infringements on personal liberty. This argument was presented 21 times in news and opinion articles and was rejected only once -- a



95% rate of agreement. For example, the *Post* (5/16) quoted producer Joseph Papp, "An attack on the arts is always a precursor to other kinds of restrictions."

Dirty Words

The coverage featured a great deal of colorful language, as the two sides hurled epithets at each other. Those favoring controver-



sial modes of expression were ridiculed as "immoral," "pornographers", and "smut peddlers", while those favoring restrictions were derided as "bigots", "McCarthyites", and "demagogues". The pro-restriction side was the target of more than two out of three (69%) of the 117 epithets coded. Moreover, the margin was almost identical in news and opinion articles, and in both the *Post* and the *Times*. (Such language was very rare on the television networks.) For example, *Times* reporter Peter Steinfels (7/7) recounted a *Newsweek* article that depicted the critics as "the righteous," "the new intolerants," "stiff-necked moralists," and "third-rate Savonarolas." The *ad hominem* character of the debate is illustrated by *Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, who argued (6/8), "a small band of religious zealots and right wing opportunists is trying to show the world that America is an intolerant puritan country, contemptuous of artists."

"Murder Imitates Porn Magazine Layout"

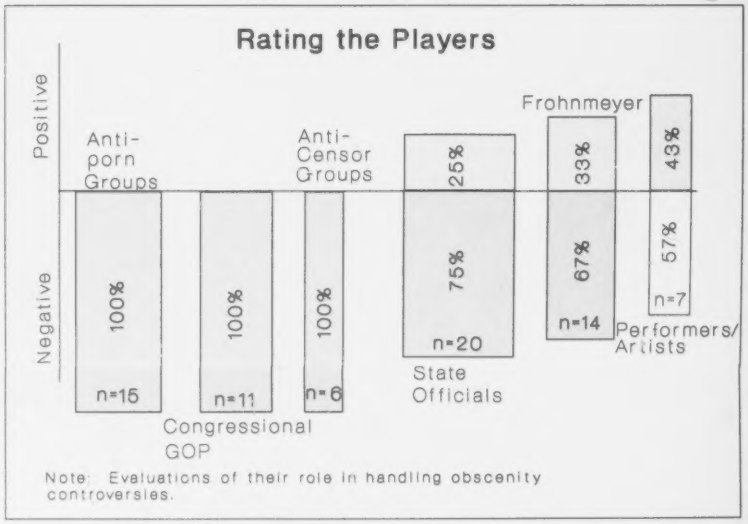
"Man Listens to Rock Music, Kills Mother"

"Liberated Women Don't Find Utopia"

American Family Association Journal, cited in New York Times, 7/2

is ever said about anyone. Sharing 100% negative ratings were Congressional Republican critics of controversial art (including Senator Helms and Representatives Rohrabacher, Coleman, and Gunderson), anti-pornography groups, and anti-censorship groups. However, the former were criticized far more often than the latter. Thus, self-described anti-pornography crusader Reverend Donald Wildmon was the target of ten negative portrayals, compared to a total of six for all anti-censorship groups.

Other parties to the controversy fared almost as badly. Ratings of state officials involved in censorship efforts were negative by a three to one margin. For example, the *Times* (7/8) quoted the 2 Live Crew album "Banned in the USA": "Corrupted politicians playing games/bring us down to boost their fame." Similarly, two out of three ratings of NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer were negative. Ironically, the most favorable ratings (still only 43% positive) were received by the performers and artists whose work touched off the debate.



X Ratings

Most of those involved were given bad marks for their handling of the controversy. Indeed, their media images at times resembled those political campaigns in which nothing good

"Today no American family can be secure against the danger that one of its children may decide to become an artist."

-Garrison Keillor
***New York Times*, 4/4**